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ABSTRACT

Poetry of the romantic age is often uninviting to students, leaving them puzzled because they do not sense the connections between the poetry and themselves. Yet, much romantic poetry can be enjoyed and comprehended if approached in terms of some personal, reflective, and connective readings. Wordsworth and Whitman are often avoided because they seem difficult to comprehend, tedious to teach, or irrelevant to students, but their poetry lends itself to personal, reflective connections. Teaching their poetry works best if teachers present meaningful connections between themselves and the poetry. These connections can then be transformed into connections between the poetry and the students, who thus find less obscurity, broader understanding, and deeper appreciation for romantic poetry. (SRT)

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BRITISH AND AMERICAN ROMANTICISM: CPR FOR THE CLASSROOM

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Back out of all this now too much for us.
Back in a time made simple by the loss
Of detail, burned, dissolved, and broken off
Like graveyard marble sculpture in the weather,
There is a house that is no more a house
Upon a farm that is no more a farm. . .

(Robert Frost, "Directive")

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Spilling over wing dams slippery with moss, the water dropped in thin steady sheets upon the rocks below, dancing in splashes of concentric circles moving out--away. As the circles ever-widened, the bridge and river focused, and I contemplated images long gone from rocks and river, bridge and road, house and childhood. Above the Ohio River the train bridge crossed from Clarksville, Indiana to Louisville, Kentucky, and for me it was the major focal point of childhood visits to my father's hometown. Over thirty years have passed, and now only the bridge and the river remain. Yet, both stand in an almost mystical union with me as I search my past and find ways to relate to my children and students of the present.

Though personal, these reflections of memories, along with the gentle nudge of Frost to go back to simpler times, became a key to helping poetry come alive for my students. More specifically, this idea was effective with British and American Romantic poetry. Too

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often, poetry of the Romantic Age remains uninviting, leaving students puzzled because they don't sense connections between the poetry and themselves. Yet, many Romantic poets and their poetry can be enjoyed and comprehended if approached in terms of some personal, reflective, connective readings. What may first be necessary for teachers to present are meaningful connections between themselves and the poetry, hoping to transform those connections into ones between the poetry and students. When such transformations occur, students find less obscurity, broader understanding, and deeper appreciation for Romantic poetry.

Of the many British and American Romantic poets, Wordsworth and Whitman are often avoided because they seem difficult to comprehend, tedious to teach, or irrelevant to students. Yet, in reading Wordsworth and Whitman, one finds they lend themselves to personal, reflective connections because both approached their material in similar fashion. These poets are introduced to my students through a series of my own personal memories evoked from the readings of selected passages of their poetry. Through such sharing, students have found their own personal connections to once obscure and meaningless poems. Further, bridges to understanding will be built, across which teachers can lead students to deeper levels of interpretation.

One work of Wordsworth's rarely encountered in high school is THE PRELUDE. Yet, sections of this piece are highly personal and autobiographical--a benchmark of Romanticism-- and students sense this if the verses used are introduced from a relational perspective. For example, early in Book Nine of THE PRELUDE, Wordsworth speaks of picking up a piece of stone rubble left from the destroyed Bastille. Pocketing the stone, he begins musing and discovers:

I looked for something which I could not find,
Affecting more emotion than I felt.
For 'tis most certain that the utmost force
Of all these various objects which may shew
The temper of my mind as then it was
Seemed less to recompense the traveller's pains,

For Wordsworth, the simple action of chancing upon a piece of stone rubble brings about a series of reflections upon a more youthful, but now lost, past. Yet, the objects which remain, the ones he picks up or shuffles through as he revisits places of an earlier time, are sufficient to recall that past. We are also reminded of past events by concrete objects we save. I share some of my own possessions, and the memories they evoke, with my students. In turn I ask them to share, sometimes by bringing things to class, or by simply recalling possessions and the memories orally. For a writing assignment, I ask students to create a descriptive "snapshot" of the object or the memory it evokes. Though our reminders of the past are not pieces of the Bastille, the effect upon our emotions parallels the spiritual sense Wordsworth experienced in THE PRELUDE. Such parallels are not difficult to make with the students, especially if we are willing to first share our own connections.

Yet, this is not merely driveling nostalgia, but a theme throughout the Romantic movement. At thirty-nine I find myself like Whitman as he echoes in SONG OF MYSELF:

. . .of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise,
Regardless of others, ever regardful of others,
Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man

and I realize, like Wordsworth and Whitman, I am a part of my past as it defines my present, and as I seek my "song," seeking my directions of forward and back. Students, too, seek appropriate direction, for we all have pasts, regardless of age, and we need only find, as Whitman says in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking:"

> . . .the key, the word up from the waves
> The word of the sweetest song and all songs,
> That strong and delicious word which, . . .
> The sea whisper'd me.
>
> (179-184)

For me the word is in the river, and though my crisis point is not as dramatic as the French Revolution was for Wordsworth, I still believe there is an important emotional connection, one which Wordsworth reflects in "Tintern Abbey:"

> . . .And so I dare to hope
> Though changed, no doubt, from what I was, when first
> I came among these hills; . . .
>
> (67-69)

Such might it be for our students as they seek a focus, as they begin to sense the immensity of what lays before them, as they wonder about the changes they've undergone since childhood.

Likewise, such was the case for me when I recently returned to southern Indiana and stood by the river and the bridge--but this time

with my three children. Though I had not forgotten, I had changed as had the scenes of my childhood. Yet, the questions I faced parallelled Wordsworth's: Would I see myself in my children? Would I sense their understanding? Would our present situation be able to respond to my past? For Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey" expressed the authenticity of his felt experiences as he related to an earlier time he had visited the River Wye while also looking forward in time to a point when he would not be at the river. Wordsworth brought shape to past, present and future time and all became part of his collective experiences as passed on to his sister Dorothy. Much of "Tintern Abbey" can be related, through personal experience, to our students. Through such connections students will sense their own relationship, and once again the Romantic notion of responding to the past will find relevance in classrooms today.

Thus, with Wordsworth's THE PRELUDE and "Tintern Abbey" teachers can begin to show students how the poet is concerned about past, present and future time as it directly affects the poet. Further, through the combined sharing of personal experiences between teachers and students, the poems will take on comprehensible dimensions otherwise not clear. For example, students can relate to the idea of returning to places of childhood and acknowledging the changes wrought by time. Further, they can then understand what happens as they relate that remembered past to a younger sibling in the present, who may then recall the memory sometime in the future. Thus, a complex idea from Wordsworth can be made clear through the sharing of such personal relationships as first presented by the teacher and then the students.

This concept of objects or places evoking past memories and refiltering them in a present situation through others is important

throughout literature simply because it is a very real experience felt by all people. The difficulty only comes when we fail to show students, through our own experiences, that what this "long dead, painfully difficult, out of touch," poet is doing relates closely to them. If such relationships can be made for Wordsworth, then they can also be made for Whitman, an often equally trying poet. Whitman has eternally plagued students with his deceptively easy sense of style and language. In many ways, Whitman is like Wordsworth because he, too, is seeking to link parts of his experiences together in an effort to find meaning in his past, present, and future. Teachers can lead students into an understanding of Whitman by applying the same techniques of relating self to poetry, and then poetry to student.

In "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," Whitman boldly speaks that time, place and distance will not keep him from feeling as future generations will feel:

> It avails not, time nor place--distance avails not,
> I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or even so many generations hence,
> Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,
> Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd,
> Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river and the bright flow, I was refresh'd,
> Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift current, I stood yet was hurried,
> Just as you look on the numberless mast of ships and the thick-stemm'd pipes of steamboats, I look'd.
>
> (stanza 3; 220-26)

Clearly Whitman is speaking of a "Tintern Abbey" experience as he relates the idea of having been where others now are. Such was my experience with my three children as we stood atop the flood wall and looked out over the Ohio River and back toward the bridge. Similarly, in Whitman's "Song of the Open Road," we see this same theme of all our experiences transcending time and place. The soul of Whitman is among us all, and my soul is among my children. If we, as teachers, are willing to be vulnerable by risking some of our personal experiences as we read these poems, chances are good our students may be coaxed to share how they relate. As we continue reading this poem we find it invites the reader to go forth into life, into the shared experiences of all humanity, until by the end Whitman emotionally cries out:

> Camerado, I give you my hand!
> I give you my love more precious than money,
> I give you myself before preaching or law;
> Will you give me yourself? Will you come travel with me?
> Shall we stick by each other as long as we live?

Both these poems optimistically speak of pasts blending with presents and futures. Through both, students can come to a greater understanding of themselves as well as of Whitman, and realize in so doing that the poetry is not nearly as obscure as it might first appear.

Another sense of how Whitman finds himself in his past is found in "I Was Looking a Long While," where the poet stresses that the clues to our past may very well be in our present perceptions, the here and now.

I was looking a long while for Intentions,
For a clew to the history of the past for myself, and for these
chants--and now I have found it,
It is not in those paged fables in the libraries, (them I
neither accept nor reject,)
It is no more in the legends than in all else,
It is in the present--it is this earth to-day,

(1-5)

I, too, find my present holds answers to my past as I look back with a plus thirty years perspective. Yet, for me, and for my students, the one poem which has held more meaning than others is "A Noiseless Patient Spider."

A noiseless patient spider,
I mark'd where on a little promontory it stood isolated,
Mark'd how to explore the vacaant vast surrounding,
It launch'd forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself,
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.

And you O my soul where you stand,
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to
connect them,
Till the bridge you will need be form'd, till the ductile anchor
hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.

Like the spider spinning silken strands to anchor its web, all our lives we throw out filament after filament after filament in an effort to anchor our lives. These filaments are past experiences, present ambitions, and future hopes. I have connected to my father, to the bridge, to the river. I hope I will connect to my children, and they to their children, and that the river will always carry them forward as it has me. Yes, I believe if we show our students how we find connections to the various poems of Wordsworth and Whitman, that they in turn will be better able to grasp the poems for themselves.

If I fail to record the images of the bridge, the river, the house, for generations of my children to come, then both children and images will be lost. Likewise, if students fail to find personal meaning and connection in poetry, then it, too, will be lost and we must seriously ask ourselves just what is happening when we teach poetry. For me, firm anchor is found within the perceptions of my past. In the end, perhaps Whitman speaks most clearly from the first stanza of "To Think of Time:"

> To think of time--of all that retrospection,
> To think of to-day, and the ages continued henceforward.
>
> Have you guess'd you yourself would not continue?
> Have you dreaded these earth-beetles?
> Have you fear'd the future would be nothing to you?
>
> Is to-day nothing? Is the beginningless past nothing?
> If the future is nothing they are just as surely nothing.

Though all I've said comes from withing my own personal

experience, my premise remains valid: if we expect students to comprehend poetry--Romantic or otherwise--it is imperative each of us find our own personal connections. Once found, we then must take the risk of sharing in the hope our students will share their understandings. Thus, as classroom teachers, we can find a vital connection for our students if we are willing to lead the way.

Yet, this leading can not merely be an academic exercise. For firm connections to be made, for a true sense of understanding to occur, our leading must come from within ourselves. Through our experiences we can show Wordsworth, Whitman, and countless other Romantic poets are vitally alive in the 1980's. It is up to us to share the sense of vulnerability felt by these poets as they struggled to find their own connections with past, present and future. In our children, with our students, among those people we connect with on our journey, will we continue as do, through their poetry, Wordsworth and Whitman.